

NURSES ON STRIKE

We're not all Florence Nightingales, as the Govt might like to think

by Carl O'Brien

STANDING on a picket line outside Cork University Hospital yesterday, Rose Lynch was speaking for all nurses.

"We're not all Florence Nightingales, as the Government might like to think. That era is over. It's time say enough is enough," said Ms Lynch, one of 30 nurses outside the hospital.

"The good thing about this strike is the nurses' unions are united. We'll stay together on this. There's no way we will be dictated to."

Her words were replicated in almost 1,000 locations around the country in what some nurses described as the blackest day in their professional history.

All non-emergency hospital admissions and the majority of out-patient clinics were cancelled, while emergency cases and patients heading to special clinics were the only admissions passing picket lines yesterday.

After day one of the nurses' first ever nationwide strike, most hospitals reported a steady inflow of emergency cases.

However, local emergency care plans were able to cope.

Nursing Alliance Chairman Liam Doran said there was an excellent turnout in staff and guaranteed that emergency plans would ensure all patients would be in safe hands throughout the strike.

However, hospital consultants have warned

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the real difficulties may only begin after 48 hours of strike action.

Cork University Hospital's situation is common to most acute hospitals.

Nurses' staffing levels have dropped to a quarter of normal numbers, the amount of the areas in operation has been slashed by 80%, while strike staff try to brace themselves for the deluge of emergency cases.

"We've been very busy. Staff have been working flat-out to deal with the influx of emergencies. But we've prepared for everything — we are meeting with management and consultants twice a day to work out what is needed."

"It's been said many times, but at the end of the day this is a dispute with employers not the patient," said Mary Moloney, theatre nurse and SIPTU member.

Along with the country's acute hospitals, cutbacks in services in hundreds of community-based facilities and institutions across the country have been hit hard. Services have been drastically curtailed and some long-term residential units have been sending back mentally-handicapped patients to their families.

On the picket line outside St Canice's Psychiatric Hospital in Kilkenny, John Burne said strikers' sympathies were with patients, but they had a point they had to prove.

"I've known many of the patients here for up to 25 years.

"They become such a part of your life that it's very hard to leave them and go out on strike. But we are very concerned for their well-being and it would be grossly unfair to create suffering in their lives as a result of our actions," he said.

The majority of the 27,000 nurses on strike are on dispute without pay, even though in many cases their workload during the dispute has increased by anything up to 40%.

strike digest

Over 3,000 out-patient appointments cancelled

OVER three thousand out-patient appointments scheduled for this week at the South East's hospitals have been cancelled as the region's 2,450 nurses join their colleagues nationwide in official strike action.

Approximately 300 elective surgery operations have been cancelled, almost a third of which were due to take place at Waterford Regional Hospital which is the worst affected hospital in the South East. The action by the 520 nurses employed there meant the cancellation of approximately 90 elective admissions, 1,500 out-patient admissions and 200 day cases.

As in all the country's hospitals, critical areas including maternity, coronary care and intensive care are being manned at all times and the Accident & Emergency Department is functioning as normal.

Other hospitals in the region badly hit include St Luke's, Kilkenny where almost 500 appointments have been cancelled and Wexford General Hospital, where a similar number of patients were affected.

Over 1,500 psychiatric and elderly day care patients had to stay at home yesterday as day care centres in hospitals such as St. Senan's, Enniscorthy and St. Canice's, Kilkenny shut their doors.

Undertakers told to help

FUNERAL undertakers in the North Eastern Health Board region were informed yesterday by representatives of the nursing alliance that they will have to undertake more work, normally carried out by hospital staff, in the preparation of corpses released for burial after hospital deaths for the duration of the strike.

Last night a spokesman for one firm of funeral undertakers in Co Monaghan said they were shocked by the "macabre nature of the communication."

Public health staff worry

SOME concern has arisen regarding the level of public health nursing staff available in Limerick yesterday.

Six out of 43 are working to deal with a normal patient compliment of over 300 including young chronic sick each day.

With the nurses on the picket lines, the figures for the various hospitals are as follows: The Regional Hospital has 363 beds plus 35 day beds, the total nursing staff 417. The normal number on duty each day is 206 including management and tutors. On duty up to lunchtime yesterday, was 49.

The number of beds in the Regional Maternity totals 99. The total nursing staff is 139 and the normal number on duty each day is 36. On duty to lunchtime yesterday 20.

The Regional Orthopaedic has 89 beds and 10 day beds. The total nursing staff is 69. The normal number of nurses on duty each day is 18, yesterday four.

The Regional Hospital has one theatre out of seven operating and three wards are closed. Approximately 750 appointments and procedures were cancelled.

The Regional Maternity has normal staffing levels with eight nurses in the neo-natal unit where there are 24 babies at present. The unit can cater for 30 babies. The nurses are not doing ward rounds with doctors, but a midwife assigned to a baby will take instructions from a doctor regarding the care of the infant.

Key services available

THE North Eastern Health Board said its essential and emergency services were "operating adequately" but all other services were cancelled or badly disrupted.

At 8am yesterday one third or 254 of nursing staff for the acute hospitals in the region were providing the emergency and essential cover. The number of patients being treated was approximately 350 or 35% of the normal capacity. A spokesman for the health board said that the public appeared to be responding to the board's request that only serious cases should present at the Accident & Emergency departments and as a result, the demand for that service had fallen.

The Public Health nursing services provided an essential service only including the terminally ill.

The board set up a public information telephone line, 1800-32-33-32 to keep people up to date.

FF councillor joins strike

A STRIKING nurse, who is also a Fianna Fáil councillor, yesterday said the Government was wrong in the stand it was taking against the nurses.

Cllr Sheila Dickson, of Killarney Urban Council, joined her colleagues on the picket line outside St Columbanus Home, Killarney, where she works.

"The Government has recognised that the nurses are a special case, but are not following through on that agreement," she said.

She called on Taoiseach Bertie Ahern to intervene personally in the dispute.

"Mr Ahern has used his negotiating skills to resolve difficult issues in the past and it's about time he did so again," Cllr Dickson stated.

"Some bit of imagination has to be brought to the resolution of this problem and to get people talking," she went on.

Cllr Dickson, a single mother of two, said she and her colleagues "who don't have a strike fund" were prepared to undergo hardship if that was necessary to win their just entitlements.

We had no choice, say disappointed strikers

by Eddie Cassidy

WITH mixed emotions on the first day of their historic industrial action, an estimated 1,800 nurses took to the picket lines, for the first time ever, at hospitals throughout Cork and Kerry.

Nurses were defiant but disappointed, almost to the stage of being contrite, at being forced to take protest action.

"We don't want to go on strike," said one strike action committee chairperson, "but we have no choice." Similar sentiments were echoed throughout most of 30 public and voluntary-run hospitals in the

Blood donors are urged to pass the picket line

Southern Health Board region where an estimated 175 scheduled operations were cancelled.

Health board chiefs conceded they were bracing themselves for further severe disruption of services but welcomed assurances from strike committees that nurses will respond to emergencies.

Public backing for the region's estimated 3,400 nurses was overwhelming yesterday with motorists honking horns in support, passers-by clapping the pickets and emergency care out-patients shaking hands with nurses at many hospitals.

A quarter of the nurses in the region provided emergency cover.

Blood donors, in particular, were urged by nurses to pass the picket line at St. Finbarr's Hospital in Cork where, along with the Erinvale, the ante-natal clinics also continued, without disruption.

All elective procedures in the acute hospitals have been cancelled, the health board said yesterday, but emphasised that emergency treatment was, and would continue to be, provided. Patients in non-emergency situations have been advised to contact their GPs.

Emergency ops go ahead at hospital

by Donal Hickey

ONLY a third of the normal complement of nurses were on duty at Tralee General Hospital, yesterday, but seven emergency operations still went ahead.

Some of the nurses left the picket lines to go back on duty. However, the message from those outside was that they were determined to stay on strike until their demands were met.

According to the Southern Health Board, 155 nurses would normally have been on duty in Tralee, but the number was down to 55 yesterday.

Between 85 and 100 non-emergency operations are carried out in the hospital each week, but all have been cancelled for the duration of the strike.

The casualty depart-

ment was reported to be much quieter than usual.

Seventy-six of the 324 beds in the hospital were vacant yesterday and the board said that emergency cover would continue to be provided.

Kerry Nursing Alliance spokesperson Maura Flynn said the strike was going well and the pickets were receiving a lot of public support.

"Motorists are blowing their horns as they pass and people are generally giving us a lot of encouragement," she said.

A similar situation was reported at the 200-patient St. Finan's Psychiatric Hospital in Killarney, where the picket lines were manned throughout the day.

It was the same at the St. Columbanus Home for the Elderly, Killarney, and at the smaller community throughout Kerry.

The casualty depart-



Picketing nurses outside University College Hospital, Galway, are given tea and rolls to warm them up by locals.

Picture: Ray Ryan



A group of nurses at a picket line in Killarney yesterday.

cases, has cancelled all elective procedures for the duration of the strike. Normally, there are about 70 elective operating theatre procedures for in patients and 40 for day patients every week.

In Tralee General Hospital, the number of nurses on duty fell by one-third to 55 with 76 beds vacant in the 324-bed hospital. An estimated 85-100 elective procedures are carried out weekly.

The day services continuing at Cork University Hospital include chemotherapy and nephrology while the continuing outpatient clinics are for fractures, warfarin, renal

transplant, diagnostic breast and Hepatitis C.

In the smaller general hospitals, at Mallow and Bantry, ten and 12 nurses were on duty, respectively, amounting to half the normal totals. Less than a third of the 69 beds in Mallow were vacant while 31 beds for acute admissions were empty in Bantry. Eight of the West Cork hospital's 18 beds in its psychiatric unit were vacant while the three day care psychiatric centres were closed.

Nurses, however, are continuing to provide 24-hour care in 20 community hospitals that facilitate long-stay elderly patients.

Strike committee chairperson in Bantry, Noelle Walsh said: "We don't want to be on strike. Our feelings are no different from other nurses throughout the country. Our dispute is not with the public but with the Department of Health where we have to highlight the inadequacies in the system and the lack of pay."

"We are feeling quite aggrieved," said Catherine Canniffe from Bandon. "It's not in our ethos to strike.

Our duty is to care for people but we have no choice. We hope the health minister realises he has to speak to our unions and that both sides must get together to resolve the dispute."

Warning over war of words in media

by Conor Keane

UNION leaders in the nurses' dispute have warned their members to be ready to have some dirt thrown on them by the Government and their employers, as far as is possible,

in the question of emergency cover other than to stand and re-state that patients will be safe in the hands of nurses, in terms of meeting their emergency needs, for the duration of the dispute.

"We have also decided not to contest the overall figures i.e. 23% in payroll costs that the Government and employers will attempt to throw every criticism and negative perspective into the public arena in the days leading up to and during the dispute. We cannot expect universal support and in fact we must expect that there will be a noticeable drop in public

support if the dispute commences," the circular from INO general secretary Liam Doran stated.

Mr Doran also told his 26,000 members the INO have taken a decision not to engage nurse's employers, as far as is possible, in the question of emergency cover other than to stand and re-state that patients will be safe in the hands of nurses, in terms of meeting their emergency needs, for the duration of the dispute.

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Nurses from St Joseph's Hospital and the Community Care Centre picketing in Clonmel.

Picture: Denis Minihane

Negotiations closed down too soon, says McManus

by Evelyn Ring

LABOUR'S Liz McManus yesterday accused the Minister of Health of closing down negotiations with the Nursing Alliance in a leisurely way just before his tea on Monday evening.

The nurses' strike should never have been allowed to happen, Ms McManus told a meeting of the Joint Committee of Health and Children.

Fine Gael's spokesperson on Health, Alan Shatter, criticised the way the initial meeting between the minister and the nurses' unions ended so quickly.

But Mr Shatter failed to get committee members to back his proposal calling on the minister to enter into constructive dialogue with the Nursing Alliance.

Instead the committee supported a Fianna Fáil amendment to his motion endorsing the efforts made by Minister Cowen to solve the dispute within the parameters of social partnership.

Ms McManus accepted that the dispute was complex but the Government

should not have walked away from it on Monday evening 15 hours before the strike was due to take place. Instead of the minister negotiating up to the 12th hour, he decided to close down the talks in a leisurely fashion before his tea.

Fianna Fáil's Sen Camillus Glynn said the nurses' unions recognised that the Government was dealing with a complex problem. A form of mutual respect now existed which he believed would form the basis of a settlement.

Fine Gael Senator Mary Jackman accused Minister Cowen of setting out on a campaign to further exacerbate the nurses' dispute.